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AUTHOR Duncan, Gregory W.
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ABSTRACT

In the first half of this century, language learning was considered essential in an individual's education, and language study was seen as improving native language comprehension and use, promoting higher levels skill development, and developing discipline. At the time, the training offered, generally in passive language skills, was appropriate for current needs. Today's world has a different alignment of power, military, social, and economic. Technological and communication advances now promote greater international interaction, and foreign language skills must be complemented with international knowledge. The United States has refused to acknowledge these changes and ignored the effects on international trade where other countries have taken concrete action. The school curriculum shows why the United States is not currently competitive. The future belongs to those countries that have technological knowledge, business acumen, and language and cultural skills. Every student in the country should be exposed to foreign languages and international studies at some level. Foreign language instruction should emphasize aural and oral skills first, and incorporate target culture awareness. International studies should be woven throughout the elementary and secondary school social studies curriculum. Such action would promote a highly knowledgeable citizenry. (MSE)

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Foreign Language and International Studies:

Past, Present, and Future

Gregory W. Duncan
Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta, Georgia

It is indeed gratifying to see state departments of education take a renewed interest in the importance of foreign language/international studies education in the curriculum. Some thirty-three states have at this point enacted some type of legislation which either encourages or requires that college-bound students enroll in at least two years of a foreign language sometime during their high school year. We, as educational leaders, are certainly heading in the right direction. Somehow, though, I remain unconvinced that many of those helping to make the changes, let alone the general American public, are truly aware of the real importance of foreign language/international studies inclusion in the curriculum and its probable impact on our society later on down the line. It is for this reason that these thoughts are offered for our consideration.

In order to adequately assess the need for foreign language/international studies in our schools, we first must take a look backward and examine the rationale for its inclusion in our courses of study prior to the student revolutions of the sixties and the consequential demise of focus on the study. In the first half of this century, Americans had a fairly fixed notion of what sort of formal training an educated person should have. Apart from the basics of English, math, science, and social studies, foreign language was generally always included. Those students who wished to pursue any type of medical career were strongly encouraged to engage in the rigors of Latin study, and students who found themselves in liberal arts programs always knew that the study of French would aid in the perception of their being well educated. Thus the use was made for the study of foreign language: it aided in better comprehension of one's own tongue, provided valuable insights into word derivations, promoted the teaching and application

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of the higher level skills, and was an excellent way to develop mental discipline.

Generally speaking, two years of foreign language study was prescribed, regardless of whether it was undertaken in high school or college, and the thrust of the training was in the skill areas of reading and writing. Very few students were taught the active language skills of listening and speaking; consequently, many of our middle-age and older American citizens view their foreign language experience as more of an academic exercise than anything else.

While this writer totally disagrees with the teaching of only the passive language skills for today's youth, quite honestly, the type of foreign language training that was offered in those early years of this century was not out of line with the foreign language needs of our country. Unquestionably, the world revolved around the United States during the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Victories from two world wars and an Asian conflict, and strong, consistent presidential leadership yielded a vibrant economy, a confident and productive citizenry, and a quality of life-style that was universally envied. The United States was clearly in charge, and there was no need to be overly concerned with having to go through the rigors of learning foreign languages—our foreign brothers so much wanted to be a part of the good life that we espoused that they readily learned English. Apart from learning our language, they wanted to know everything about our daily lives, from our regional idiosyncracies to our collective values. One particular society has probably never been so carefully dissected in such a short period of time by so many people. The result of all this activity happening around us began to create a certain smugness in the American people, and we have been successful in passing that trait on to succeeding generations. We stopped being impressed with the fact that foreigners wanted to learn our language and culture so that they, too, could take part in the good life; we began to expect and demand that other nationalities speak our language and be knowledgeable about what needs to be done to find our pleasure. The "ugly American" syndrome emerged, and, unfortunately, it is still very much with us.

The world of the eighties looks very much different from that picture. The Vietnam conflict and the accompanying disillusionment of the American people gave the other countries of the world some time to sit back, reflect, and realize that they, too, had a right to offer solutions; other alternatives were available; and, maybe they could increase their position of prominence in the world order. So, while we grappled with domestic as well as international challenges, the rest of the world began to take more control of its own destiny. The end result has been a new alignment of world power,

not so much in weaponry and military might, but in economics, trade, and other factors that control so much of our daily lives.

Incredibly rapid advances in technology and communications have put the nations of the world into closer and more frequent contact, and we know that the trend will continue at an even faster rate. The consequence of this greater interaction further heightens the need for increased foreign language and international studies knowledge. On many occasions, while singing the praises of wise curriculum planners in European countries where students study several foreign languages beginning at the elementary grades, this writer has been reminded by his (American) audience that the reason the Europeans place such high emphasis on foreign language study is their proximity to countries whose languages are different from their own. This assertion is, of course, true. And it is that same argument that provides the rationale for greater study of foreign languages and international studies by Americans today and in preparation for tomorrow. We must make certain that, along with the need for foreign language knowledge, we see the accompanying need for international studies education. An integral component of communication is the ability to understand a speaker within his cultural context. The study of the culture of the people who speak the language offers valuable insights into where the emphases of that people are placed. It can make the difference in successful diplomatic negotiations and in international business and economic endeavors.

Interestingly enough, while the world about us is changing at such rapid speed, the United States has, in great part, refused to acknowledge those changes. Many of our citizens still fully believe that the other countries of the world revolve around us and look to us to supply all the answers. This sort of mentality is evidenced in our business dealings as well as in our diplomatic endeavors and in our educational circles. Since the mid-1970s, the United States has possessed an international trade deficit that continues to increase. Economists blame much of the deficit on a strong dollar, which makes it less lucrative for American exports to be purchased by foreign countries; but the 1979 Presidential Commission Report on Foreign Languages and International Studies indicates that many American business leaders cite our lack of ability to communicate effectively in foreign languages and our lack of understanding of foreign culture patterns as a big hindrance in our international trading.

Effective international trading does not harbor any deep mysteries. It follows a very logical, easy-to-comprehend path. The Japanese supply us with the most graphic example to illustrate successful trading on an international scale. When the Japanese realized that there was a market in the United States for their products, they knew that two obstacles had to be

overcome before successful marketing could occur: an understanding of the American way of life and the ability to communicate effectively face-to-face with interested purchasers of their products. So, they very studiously went about accomplishing those tasks. The Japanese studied the Americans as closely as any anthropologist would possibly have prescribed. They examined our value systems, our ability to purchase, and were able to predict the future marketing successes of products based on the newly gleaned knowledge. Additionally, they realized that effective international selling means speaking the language of the customer; consequently they mastered use of the English language. When the "invasion" of goods really hit, we didn't have Japanese businessmen coming here with busloads of interpreters; they would have none of that. They intended to show their prospective purchasers that they wanted their business badly enough to take the pains to learn the customer's language. And it worked like a charm.

It is amazing that the United States has not adopted similar approaches to aid in relieving its international trade deficit. Each year myriad newspapers and magazines lament the increasing deficit. Congress and the President are repeatedly asked to impose import regulations in order to give American industry an opportunity to catch its breath. Yet we fail to realize one of the very obvious problems in our international trading: we simply are not competitive! We may have a product that will suit the needs of foreign consumers, but another country may end up beating us out of the sale because its salesman was better prepared to deal with the customer both linguistically and culturally.

The curriculum in our schools clearly indicates why we are not competitive. Foreign language study and international studies fall into the elective side of course offerings across the country. That very fact demonstrates that our nation does not view the acquisition of skills in those areas as very important. We say by the elective status that we make the opportunity available to those interested, but it is not a skill that is of the utmost importance in a child's education.

We have had a glance at the past and the present, but what about the future? Clearly, the future is going to belong to those people who are visionary and who make their plans accordingly. Those visionaries see a world that is going to continue to shrink at an ever-increasing rate causing different societies to be thrown into even greater contact. This increased interaction will, of course, require a greater need for the ability to communicate effectively and to be more sensitive to each others needs and problems. Americans have always prided themselves on their ability to produce an educated and responsible citizenry; for us to be able to continue to accomplish that, we must realign our thinking regarding the importance of foreign languages and international studies for our children. In the twenty-

first century, those nations who will end up at the top of the heap are going to be those who not only have technological know-how and business acumen but who also are adept at speaking the languages of their international counterparts and at understanding what makes them tick. To feel that anything less than that knowledge and ability will be adequate is to bury our heads in the sand.

Many will argue that not everyone needs to have this sort of knowledge because those people actively involved in international affairs will actually be a very small percentage of the U.S. population, and that is, of course, true. However, every citizen in this country throughout his life will make decisions about how he feels our nation should do this or that on an international scale. Those individual decisions then join together to form the collective position of our nation. To have our future citizens making such important decisions without the benefit of training in international sensitivity is to have them make decisions in a vacuum. They will be decisions that are not soundly processed; they will be decisions that could be destructive not only to our way of life but also to that of the entire world. We should want our citizenry to have the skills that will enable it to look objectively at situations, analize those situations with sensitivity, and make rational decisions regarding matters that will affect so may people.

So, what is needed in the way of reform to better prepare us for the future? Every student in our nation needs to be exposed to foreign language and/or international studies education at some level. While it is desirable to have a citizenry that is fully communicative in a language other than its own native tongue, a bare minimum should be the skills relative to international studies that will equip Americans to make good decisions about world affairs.

Foreign language study in our nation should emphasize first and foremost the ability to understand and speak the second language. This focus should be obvious to the learner from the first day of class and should continue through the sequence, no matter its length. The highlighting of the listening and speaking skills should not imply no work in the reading and writing skill areas; those skills should be developed as well. In fact, a balanced approach to teaching a foreign language is definitely the best route to follow; however, the overwhelming need of our nation is and will continue to be the ability to function actively in the foreign language with our international counterparts. Similarly, the study of foreign language is not complete without close examination of the culture of the people who speak the language being studied. This study should be value-centered; that is, it should be principally concerned with the themes of that culture, how the people think and react.

International studies instruction should be interwoven throughout the social studies curriculum of our nation's schools. Elementary-age students can be exposed to unit studies of different nations, while middle-grade youth can go into greater depth in world studies classes. High schoolers should have the opportunity to discuss global issues and their impact on the various societies.

To have our students follow such a curriculum would enable this nation to produce the most knowledgeable citizenry in its existence. In addition to the basic survival skills being learned in English, math, science, and social studies classes, they would possess skills that would allow them to function as first-class international citizens, putting them in the circle where world decisions will be made.

Surely we do not want to produce a nation that will be handicapped. To disavow the importance of foreign languages and international studies for our students who will live in the twenty-first century, however, is to do just that.